

[By Nicole Gaudiano, Burlington Free Press](#)

Vermont's lone congressman was still working Friday to persuade his undecided colleagues to vote for a sweeping health care reform bill.

"It's going to be razor thin," Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., said.

The House will vote on President Barack Obama's health care overhaul bill Sunday. Democratic leaders need 216 votes for passage.

Citing his reasons for supporting the legislation, Welch called the bill the "biggest deficit reduction vote I will be able to make in Congress." The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office's estimated the \$940 billion package will reduce the deficit by \$138 billion over the next 10 years.

He said it will provide universal health care coverage and immediately strengthen Medicare by expanding its longevity and helping seniors with prescription drug benefits.

"We're on the threshold of a historic decision for America," he said. "Are we going to have a health care system where all are covered and all (help) pay, or are we going to be stuck in the status quo that's killing us?"

Welch will hold a statewide telephone town hall meeting Monday to discuss the outcome of the vote and the next steps regarding health care reform.

"One of the challenges in the debate about this bill is there was more fiction than fact," he said. "I think that the passage of the bill is going to eliminate many of those arguments because the reality is going to replace the rhetoric."

Welch acknowledged disappointments with the bill, saying he was "incredibly frustrated" that it doesn't include his proposal to allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices for seniors. That measure, which passed the House but not the Senate, would have saved taxpayers \$156 billion over 10 years by ending a "giveaway" to the pharmaceutical industry in which taxpayers "buy wholesale but pay retail" for drugs, he said.

But it would have come on top of an \$80 billion deal the White House struck with the pharmaceutical industry to help close a gap in Medicare drug coverage for seniors known as the "doughnut hole."

"That was a deal the White House made," Welch said. "We're not bound by it. In my view, it was a bad deal."

Welch said he was also disappointed that the bill doesn't include a public health insurance option or a repeal of the exemption for health and medical malpractice insurers from federal antitrust laws, championed by Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., in the Senate.

"Don't get me going," he said. "There are many things that are not in this bill that should be. And we're going to have to come and fight another day."

"Those of us who are strong supporters of the bill have to be modest, acknowledging this is a first step," he added. "It's a critical step, and failure to take, it in my view, would be very harmful to America, to our businesses and our families."

Welch said he has received assurances that his measure to allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices would get a vote later this year. And he might have a chance to vote on a public option, too.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent, received a written assurance from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid on Thursday that he would work to ensure a Senate vote on a health insurance public option "in the coming months." Sanders publicly released the letter from Reid on Friday.

Sanders and other senators had decided to refrain from offering a public option amendment to the current legislation to avoid undermining the process, according to a spokesman.